

Commencement Address for Joplin High School in Joplin, Missouri
May 21, 2012

Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. A few people I want to acknowledge. First of all, you have an outstanding Governor in Jay Nixon, and we are proud of all the work that he's done. I want to acknowledge Senator Claire McCaskill, who is here; Representative Billy Long; your mayor, Melodee Colbert-Kean; somebody who doesn't get a lot of attention, but does amazing work all across the country, including here in Joplin, the head of FEMA, the Administrator, Craig Fugate, who spent an awful lot of time here helping to rebuild.

Superintendent Huff, Principal Sachetta, to the faculty, the parents, the family, friends, the people of Joplin, and most of all the class of 2012, congratulations on your graduation, and thank you for allowing me the honor of playing a small part in this special day.

Now, the job of a commencement speaker primarily is to keep it short. Chloe, they've given me more than 2 minutes. *[Laughter]* But the other job is to inspire. But as I look out at this class and across this city, what's clear is that you're the source of inspiration today, to me, to this State, to this country, and to people all over the world.

Last year, the road that led you here took a turn that no one could've imagined. Just hours after the class of 2011 walked across this stage, the most powerful tornado in six decades tore a path of devastation through Joplin that was nearly a mile wide and 13 long. In just 32 minutes, it took thousands of homes and hundreds of businesses and 161 of your neighbors, friends, and family. It took a classmate, Will Norton, who had just left this auditorium with a diploma in his hand. It took Lantz Hare, who should've received his diploma next year.

And by now, I expect that most of you have probably relived those 32 minutes again and again: where you were; what you saw; when you knew for sure that it was over; the first contact, the first phone call you had with somebody you loved; the first day that you woke up in a world that would never be the same.

And yet the story of Joplin isn't just what happened that day. It's the story of what happened the next day and the day after that and all the days and weeks and months that followed. As your city manager, Mark Rohr, has said, the people here chose to define the tragedy "not by what happened to us, but by how we responded."

Class of 2012, that story is yours. It's part of you now. As others have mentioned, you've had to grow up quickly over the last year. You've learned at a younger age than most of us that we can't always predict what life has in store. No matter how we might try to avoid it, life surely can bring some heartache, and life involves struggles. And at some point, life will bring loss.

But here in Joplin, you've also learned that we have the power to grow from these experiences. We can define our lives not by what happens to us, but by how we respond. We can choose to carry on. We can choose to make a difference in the world. And in doing so, we can make true what's written in Scripture, that "tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Of all that's come from this tragedy, let this be the central lesson that guides us, let it be the lesson that sustains you through whatever challenges lie ahead.

As you begin the next stage in your journey, wherever you're going, whatever you're doing, it's safe to say you will encounter greed and selfishness and ignorance and cruelty and sometimes just bad luck. You'll meet people who try to build themselves up by tearing others down. You'll meet people who believe that looking after others is only for suckers.

But you're from Joplin, so you will remember, you will know, just how many people there are who see life differently, those who are guided by kindness and generosity and quiet service.

You'll remember that in a town of 50,000 people, nearly 50,000 more came in to help the weeks after the tornado, perfect strangers who've never met you and didn't ask for anything in return.

One of them was Mark Carr, who drove 600 miles from Rocky Ford, Colorado, with a couple of chainsaws and his three little children. One man traveled all the way from Japan, because he remembered that Americans were there for his country after last year's tsunami, and he wanted the chance, he said, "to pay it forward." There were AmeriCorps volunteers who have chosen to leave their homes and stay here in Joplin until the work is done.

And then there was the day that Mizzou's football team rolled into town with an 18-wheeler full of donated supplies. And of all places, they were assigned to help out on Kansas Avenue. *[Laughter]* I don't know who set that up. *[Laughter]* And while they hauled away washing machines and refrigerators from the debris, they met a woman named Carol Mann who had just lost the house she lived in for 18 years. And Carol didn't have a lot. She works part-time at McDonald's. She struggles with seizures, and she told the players that she had even lost the change purse that held her lunch money. So one of them, one of the players, went back to the house, dug through the rubble, and returned with the purse with \$5 inside.

And Carol's sister said: "So much of the news that you hear is so negative. But these boys renewed my faith that there are so many good people in the world."

That's what you'll remember, because you're from Joplin.

You will remember the half million dollar donation that came from Angelina Jolie and some up-and-coming actor named Brad Pitt. *[Laughter]* But you'll also remember the \$360 that was delivered by a 9-year-old boy who organized his own car wash. You'll remember the school supplies donated by your neighboring towns, but maybe you'll also remember the brand new laptops that were sent from the United Arab Emirates, a tiny country on the other side of the world.

When it came time for your prom, make-up artist Melissa Blayton organized an effort that collected over a thousand donated prom dresses, FedEx kicked in for the corsages, Joplin's own Liz Easton, who had lost her home and her bakery in the tornado, made a hundred—or 1,500 cupcakes for the occasion. They were good cupcakes. *[Laughter]*

There are so many good people in the world. There is such a decency, a bigness of spirit, in this country of ours. And so, class of 2012, you've got to remember that. Remember what people did here. And like that man who came all the way from Japan to Joplin, make sure in your own life that you pay it forward.

Now, just as you've learned the goodness of people, you've also learned the power of community. And you've heard from some of the other speakers how powerful that is. And as you take on the roles of coworker and business owner, neighbor, citizen, you'll encounter all kinds of divisions between groups, divisions of race and religion and ideology. You'll meet people who like to disagree just for the sake of being disagreeable. *[Laughter]* You'll meet

people who prefer to play up their differences instead of focusing on what they have in common, where they can cooperate.

But you're from Joplin, so you will always know that it's always possible for a community to come together when it matters most. After all, a lot of you could've spent your senior year scattered throughout different schools, far from home. But Dr. Huff asked everybody to pitch in so that school started on time, right here in Joplin. He understood the power of this community, and he understood the power of place.

And so these teachers worked extra hours, coaches put in extra time. That mall was turned into a classroom. The food court became a cafeteria, which maybe some of you thought was an improvement. [Laughter] And yes, the arrangements might have been a little noisy and a little improvised, but you hunkered down. You made it work together. You made it work together.

That's the power of community. Together, you decided this city wasn't about to spend the next year arguing over every detail of the recovery effort. At the very first meeting, the first town meeting, every citizen was handed a Post-it note and asked to write down their goals and their hopes for Joplin's future. And more than a thousand notes covered an entire wall and became the blueprint that architects are following to this day. I'm thinking about trying this with Congress, give them some Post-it notes. [Laughter]

Together, the businesses that were destroyed in the tornado decided they weren't about to walk away from the community that made their success possible, even if it would've been easier, even if it would've been more profitable to go someplace else. And so today, more than half the stores that were damaged on the Range Line are up and running again. Eleven more are planning to join them. And every time a company reopens its doors, people cheer the cutting of a ribbon that bears the town's new slogan: "Remember, rejoice, and rebuild." That's community.

I've been told, class of 2012, that before the tornado, many of you couldn't wait to leave here once high school was finally over. So student council president Julia Lewis—where is Julia? She's out here somewhere. [Laughter] She is too embarrassed to raise her hand. I'm quoting you, Julia. She said: "We never thought Joplin was anything special"—now that's typical with teenagers; they don't think their parents are all that special either—[laughter]—"but seeing how we responded to something that tore our community apart has brought us together. Everyone has a lot more pride in our town." So it's no surprise then that many of you have decided to stick around and go to Missouri Southern or go to colleges or community colleges that aren't too far away from home.

That's the power of community. That's the power of shared effort and shared memory. Some of life's strongest bonds are the ones we forge when everything around us seems broken. And even though I expect that some of you will ultimately end up leaving Joplin, I'm pretty confident that Joplin will never leave you. The people who went through this with you, the people who you once thought of as simply neighbors or acquaintances, classmates, the people in this auditorium tonight, you're family now. They're your family.

And so my deepest hope for all of you is that as you begin this new chapter in your life, you'll bring that spirit of Joplin to every place you travel, to everything you do. You can serve as a reminder that we're not meant to walk this road alone, that we're not expected to face down adversity by ourselves. We need God. We need each other. We are important to each other, and we're stronger together than we are on our own.

And that's the spirit that has allowed all of you to rebuild this city, and that's the same spirit we need right now to help rebuild America. And you, class of 2012, you're going to help lead this effort. You're the ones who will help build an economy where every child can count on a good education. You're the one that's going to make sure this country is a place where everybody who is willing to put in the effort can find a job that supports a family. You're the ones that will make sure we're a country that controls our own energy future, where we lead the world in science and technology and innovation. America only succeeds when we all pitch in and pull together, and I'm counting on you to be leaders in that effort, because you're from Joplin, and you have already defied the odds.

Now, there are a lot of stories here in Joplin of unthinkable courage and resilience over the last year, but still there are some that stand out, especially on this day. And by now, most of you know Joplin High's senior Quinton Anderson; look, he is already looking embarrassed. Somebody is talking about him again. But, Quinton, I'm going to talk about you anyway, because in a lot of ways, Quinton's journey has been Joplin's journey.

When the tornado struck, Quinton was thrown across the street from his house. The young man who found Quinton couldn't imagine that Quinton would survive his injuries. Quinton woke up in a hospital bed 3 days later. And it was then that his sister Grace told him that both their parents had been lost in the storm.

So Quinton went on to face over 5 weeks of treatment, including emergency surgery. But he left that hospital determined to carry on, to live his life, to be there for his sister. And over the past year, he's been a football captain who cheered from the sidelines when he couldn't play. He worked that much harder so he could be ready for baseball in the spring. He won a national scholarship as a finalist for the high school football "Rudy" awards. He plans to study molecular biology at Harding University this fall.

Quinton has said that his motto in life is "always take that extra step." And today, after a long and improbable journey for Quinton, and for Joplin and for the entire class of 2012, that extra step is about to take you towards whatever future you hope for and whatever dreams you hold in your hearts.

Yes, you will encounter obstacles along the way. I guarantee you will face setbacks and you will face disappointments. But you're from Joplin, and you're from America. And no matter how tough times get, you'll always be tougher. And no matter what life throws at you, you will be ready. You will not be defined by the difficulties you face, but by how you respond, with grace and strength and a commitment to others.

Langston Hughes, poet, civil rights activist who knew some tough times, he was born here in Joplin. In a poem called "Youth," he wrote:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.
Yesterday
A night-gone thing,
A sun-down name.
And dawn-today. Broad arc above the road we came.
We march.

To the people of Joplin and the class of 2012, the road has been hard and the day has been long, but we have tomorrow, so we march. We march together, and you're leading the way, because you're from Joplin. Congratulations.

May God bless you. May God bless the class of 2012. May God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:40 p.m. in the Leggett & Platt Athletic Center at Missouri Southern State University. In his remarks, he referred to C.J. Huff, superintendent, Joplin Schools; Kerry Sachetta, principal, and Chloe Hadley, senior class president, Joplin High School; Caleb, Colton, and Jordan Carr, children of Rocky Ford, CO, resident Mark Carr; Patricia Williams, aunt of Joplin, MO, resident Carol Mann; volunteer Toyshia Muto; actress Angelina Jolie; and George Zevin, who organized a car wash for Joplin schools.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Joplin High School in Joplin, MO, commencement address.

Locations: Joplin, MO.

Names: Anderson, Grace; Anderson, Quinton; Blayton, Melissa; Carr, Caleb; Carr, Colton; Carr, Jordan; Carr, Mark; Colbert-Kean, Melodee; Easton, Elizabeth C.; Fugate, W. Craig; Hadley, Chloe; Huff, C.J.; Jolie, Angelina; Lewis, Julia; Long, William H., II; Mann, Carol; McCaskill, Claire; Muto, Toyshia; Nixon, Jeremiah W. "Jay"; Pitt, Brad; Rohr, R. Mark; Sachetta, Kerry; Williams, Patricia; Zevin, George.

Subjects: Homeland Security, Department of : Emergency Management Agency, Federal; Missouri : Governor; Missouri : Joplin High School in Joplin; Missouri : President's visit; Missouri : Tornado, damage and recovery efforts; Voluntarism.

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